My Friend Doggie

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Ernest Nister

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LOS ANGELES

MY FRIEND DOGGIE

or

AN ONLY CHILD.

UP at the Hall there was only one little girl. She was, however, such a very pretty little girl, and so very gentle and sweet-tempered, that she could hardly have been improved upon, and all the eight children at the Lodge loved her.

The eight children at the Lodge were not particularly pretty, neither were they particularly good, but they had warm, affectionate little hearts, and I suppose that, as each baby brings love into the world with it, there was eight times the amount of love in the cottage that there was at the Hall.

When the children at the cottage looked curiously at the little lady in her velvet and fur, their mother used to be ashamed of them, and tell them that beauty was only skin-deep, and it was better to be good than pretty—and they all believed her except Bet, and on that dreadful day when Francey told the little lady to her face that she did not see she (the little lady) was a bit better than

she was, except for her clothes, poor Mrs. Smith had wept tears of sorrow and mortification, and Francey had dined on dry bread for a week—and they had all again implicitly believed, as their mother had told them, that they were only common children and Miss Dolly was a very superior being indeed—except Bet.

Bet was the youngest but one, so it was the seventh time the Angel of Love had come to the cottage when he was born. He was particularly plain—bless his heart, just like his dear father, Mrs. Smith used to say to the servants at the Hall—and although he brought plenty of love into the poor home, unfortunately he did not bring any extra bread and butter with him.

Bet was a dreadful boy—what his mother called a limb. He used to plant his sturdy legs apart, and gape at Miss Dolly and the Squire, without a touch of his cap or a pull at his rough curls, for all the world as if they were common cottage people like himself—for sometimes when a little common child is born the fairies forget to tell him that he is not quite like the upper classes, and then he is very apt to go through life never learning the difference at all, and having the impertinence sometimes to grow up into something quite original.

But the funny thing was that, for all his impudent ways, it was Bet that Miss Dolly chose to love out of all the children at the Lodge. If she ran away from the nurse or her governess in the garden, they were sure to

find her sitting behind a bush with Bet, sharing strawberries on a leaf, or making cups and saucers out of acorns.

Her mother used to laugh, and say that an only child must have someone to play with, and that Bet was a dear impudent boy, with his brown curls and his twinkling eyes and his ugly face.

Now Bet was very fond of animals, and the gamekeeper had given him a spaniel puppy, and the gardener's boy had given him a kitty, and one winter's morning he had raced them down the avenue together and into the road.

Just as he got through the gate of the avenue he saw a whole lot of rough boys bounding and leaping towards him, and before he knew what they were going to do they had seized the poor little kitty, and were tossing it from one to the other as if it were a ball.

Bet was terrified and he was furious—and, above all, he heard the mewing of the frightened kitty as she clung with teeth and claws to the cruel hand—but Bet was only six years old, and though he kicked and struck and fought, the boys just laughed and shook him off as if he had been a cross puppy, and not a very brave, angry, ugly little boy.

But at that moment there came to his ears the sweetest sound he had ever heard—the sound of flying feet upon the gravel, and a furious screaming voice, much more like an infuriated cockatoo than a very superior little girl.

"You leave that boy's

kitten alone!" she was shouting, as she came flying down the drive in her fur cloak and scarlet hat. "You—you cowards—I'll call the gardeners. I'll call the coachman. You leave that cat alone!"

She had plunged into the midst of them, kicking and hitting much harder than Bet had done, and attracting so much attention that Smith rushed out of the cottage with his stick and Mrs. Smith's red face appeared at an upper window. But Dolly had won the victory before the reinforcements arrived. The boys had dispersed in a great hurry at the sight of the stick and Smith's powerful arm, and Dolly and Bet were huddled on the bank by the roadside together, with the poor frightened pussy clasped in their arms. Dolly was crying, now that the need for courage was over, and Bet was very white and very still, for a great resolve was forming itself in his mind, and it took all his strength to be capable of the sacrifice. The whole family came out to comfort Dolly and dry her tears, and Smith himself prepared to escort her back to the house. Her own spaniels, Dash and Dandy, had found her out, and were leaping joyfully upon

her, partly from affection no doubt, but partly because she still held the long-suffering pussy out of the way of their frantic leaps.

"I'm ever so much obliged to you, Miss Dolly," said Mrs. Smith, wiping the mud and snow off her fur cloak, and she looked round furtively at Bet to see if he had it in his mind to be polite or not.

But there was so need to tell Bet to pull his curly locks to-day. Even if one is an independent young Briton, with very crude ideas of social distinctions, one is often blessed with very strong feelings of love or gratitude, and Bet's blue eyes were shining.

"I'll never forget," he said; "I'll give you my best—always—I won't never forget."

He choked and ran away into the house, and Mrs. Smith excused him. "You see, he's but young, Miss," she said, "and he's not free of his words, but he's very much your debtor for the cat, that he is."

So Smith and the big stick, and Dash and Dolly, strolled away to the house together.

Half way along the avenue they came upon three of the eight children scattering salt upon the snow, hoping it might lodge upon the tail of a fat robin that was hopping from twig to twig. They shrank away out of their father's sight, but Dolly could not resist stopping to see if they succeeded. However,

Dash and Dandy made such a rush at the fat robin, both at once, that he flew away with a frightened chirp, and Dolly nodded to the children, and ran on home.

But all that day Bet sat moodily in his little corner by the grate, with the great resolve taking root in his slow mind. To-morrow was Christmas Day and he wanted to make Miss Dolly a present, and in all the world he had only one thing of his very own of any value and that was his puppy. He wanted to give it to her, and in his heart he meant to give it to her, but it was like tearing a very precious flower up by the roots to take this great love out of his life; for he *did* love it. It ate out of his saucer at meals and slept in his crib at night, and, however little there might be to eat, Bet's share was equally divided with the puppy.

He did not tell his mother what he was thinking about, or why his tears fell that night into the puppy's saucer, because she used to say to Bet sometimes that they were too poor to be generous, and Bet did not want to hear her say that to-night; so he crept silently to bed and laid his cheek upon the puppy's coat, and in two minutes they were fast asleep.

And that was how it happened that on Christmas morning there was an empty chair at the crowded table, and a neglected basin of bread and milk standing on the hob. There were no Christmas stockings for the Lodge children and no parcels on their plates, but Mrs. Smith

loved all her children very much, and especially Bet, so she kept going uneasily between the window and the fire, saying anxiously, first to one and then to another: "Wherever is the boy?"

Now the Lodge children were well brought up, and under no circumstances were they allowed to talk at meals, but when Mrs. Smith had repeated her question for about the twentieth time, one fat child, bolder than the rest, said, stolidly:

"He's up to the Hall, mother; he's going to make a present of the pup to Miss Dolly."

"Dear, dear," said the mother, doubtfully, "to think of that; whatever'll the Squire think—dear, dear, now—the impudence of Bet."

Seeing her conversational effort was so well received the bold little girl made another venture:

"He's just *wropt* up in Miss Dolly," she said.

"Tut, tut," said her mother, hastily, "that's very unbecoming, Susan—dear, dear, what a saying; well, put his bowl on one side, Francey, and clean up the children for church."

Bet had started in the early morning over the crisp hard ground, with the doomed puppy at his heels. He had quite fought out the matter with himself, and he felt he was *glad* to give up the puppy—all the more glad, perhaps, because the fight had been a hard one. Every two or three steps he turned to look at the soft little creature, tumbling over itself and making frantic

efforts to keep up with his bold strides. Once it crept on to a bit of ice, and his blood ran cold with fear, but at last he reached the great front steps, and sat down exhausted with the puppy in his arms. Its tongue was out and its head hanging, and they were both nearly asleep when the door was opened suddenly behind them and a soft voice said: "Why, Bet! and the puppy!"

Bet was on his feet in a minute. "It's for Miss Dolly —I brought it up—it's the only thing that's mine."

"My dear little boy, Dolly will be so pleased." Dolly's mother thought, with a pang, of Dolly as she had seen her an hour ago, with arms full of toys, and her room littered with presents, and then of that other home, so full of children, so bare of presents, out of which another generous gift had come for Dolly. There were eight sealed parcels lying in the housekeeper's room, but a generous impulse prevented her from speaking of them to Bet just now. She could hear Dolly on the stairs, and Bet's solemn little voice, and the puppy's squeals—and she was glad to think that she *had* remembered, and that Dolly would have the joy of coming too when she took the eight parcels to the Lodge. Far better than rank or distinction or money is the love that levels all—an everlasting bond between the Hall and the Lodge.

Geraldine Glasgow.